

Leadership panel opens its rules for public review

H. Philip West, executive director of Common Cause, is pleased with the committee's actions. "For years, I longed for a public meeting of JCLS and it never happened."

01:00 AM EDT on Thursday, June 3, 2004

BY SCOTT MAYEROWITZ

Journal State House Bureau (Providence Journal)

PROVIDENCE -- As part of an effort to shed its longtime reputation as a clandestine body, the Joint Committee on Legislative Services yesterday approved a new set of rules and regulations that will be kept on file with the secretary of state for public review.

This is the first time in 30 years that the rules of the leadership committee that oversees the General Assembly's hiring and spending have been amended.

One key change involves oversight of spending.

The old rules required that the purchase of any services was subject to the approval of the chairman -- who is the Speaker of the House -- and the full five-member committee at its next meeting.

The new language just requires the chairman's approval and calls for the full committee's vote "where practicable."

The other major set of changes relates to travel. The old rules allowed legislators to fly first-class. Yesterday, that provision was removed. The legislators' daily meal allowance while traveling was also increased from \$20 to \$30. The meal allowance is now the same for the governor, lieutenant governor, secretary of state, attorney general and general treasurer.

When asked why no further changes were made to the eight pages of rules, House Majority Leader Gordon D. Fox, D-Providence, said this was a "first step."

"We're trying to get them up to date from 1974 before we do anything more substantive," Fox said.

H. Philip West, executive director of Common Cause of Rhode Island, agreed that reform of the group, known as JCLS, is "an incremental process"

"The fact that they're meeting now regularly -- they're meeting in the open -- this never used to happen," West said. "For years, I longed for a public meeting of JCLS and it never happened."

Yesterday's meeting was the group's first since Feb. 26.

West said he has had a chance to review the new rules.

"Somebody asked if I would have other suggestions and the answer is: probably yes," he said. "But for now, just that they're doing it is good."

In other business,

The committee also voted yesterday to award a contract to Rhode Island Court Reporting, of East Providence, to run a pilot program where Capitol Television broadcasts of the House and Senate sessions next year would have closed captioning.

Rhode Island Court Reporting will be paid \$110 an hour for its work. Last year, there were 179 hours of House and Senate sessions. In addition, the committee approved \$8,000 in technology upgrades to provide the closed captioning. The bid was the same price for on- or off-site work.

The company also provides captioning services to Rhode Island's PBS station and to ABC 6, according to a letter from company president Patricia A. Quirk. If there is a "last-minute cancellation," the company can charge a \$200 fee.

Allied Court Reporters, of Cranston, bid \$100 an hour for on-site work and \$125 an hour for off-site captioning. Both required a two-hour minimum. JCLS director Marisa White said sessions often don't reach an hour, let alone two.

A third company, Visual Audio Captioning, of Fairfax, Va., also submitted a bid. White said that the company asked for its bid to be kept private for "competitive reasons." White said that since the state

put out a request for proposals -- and not a formal bid requests -- she believed the company's bid was not public information, but said it was more expensive.

The committee also approved the \$34,999 purchase from B&H Photo, of New York, of a portable camera for Capitol Television so additional programs can be produced.

Capitol Television would be able to cover news conferences held outside a few select rooms already wired for broadcasting. It could also cover hearings, such as the ones for redistricting held a few years ago across the state. Another proposed use is "video profiles of each representative and senator."

The only committee member to vote against the expense was House Minority Leader Robert A. Watson, R-East Greenwich, who called the video profiles "glorified reelection pieces."

"This is great stuff for elected officials, incumbents," Watson said.